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ABSTRACT

This discussion provides parents with guidelines for selecting appropriate literature for children. Initially and briefly explored is the issue of the value of literature written specifically for children. Subsequent discussion explores aspects of picture books, fairy stories, beginning readers, comics, and children's books. Drawing on research by Weitzman, Eifler, Hokada, and Ross (1972), commentary on picture books emphasizes the surprising extent to which these first books for children are biased according to sex. The discussion of fairy stories relies heavily on Bettelheim's (1976) "The Use of Enchantment: The Magic and Importance of Fairy Tales." It is recommended that fairy stories be allowed to have their unconscious effects and that adults not impose interpretations. It is also suggested that the true "characters" of beginning readers are consonants, vowels, and dipthongs; supplemental stories are recommended. Discussion of comics focuses on their unworthiness for encouraging serious attention and on ways their paucity of content and effects can be brought to the attention of young readers. The discussion of children's books offers general guidelines for selection. In particular, various criticisms of certain children's books are reported, and a list of desirable features from both adults' and children's perspectives is provided. Finally, the document includes brief analyses of three children's stories, a list of recommended stories, and a guide for selecting children's literature and other reading material. (RH)

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CHILDREN'S LITERATURE: CHOICE AND INFLUENCE

by
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CHILDREN'S LITERATURE: CHOICE AND INFLUENCE

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1. *VALUE OF LITERATURE FOR CHILDREN*

For many adults, children's literature is a subject that needs justification. For example: They contend that up to the mid-nineteenth century, children managed without having books specially written for them and, indeed, children's books were considered not worthy of critical discussion before the 1950s.

Adults may also maintain that they read very little when young. They might name famous people, even literary figures, who claim to have read almost no children's literature during their childhood (e.g., Alan Garner, leading contemporary children's writer, who, from the age of 8 to leaving Oxford, did not read one English novel).

Others ask do literary experiences really matter very much before maturity and access to adult literature? Some query the necessity of the rapidly increasing number of children's books. These people calculate that a child could read no more than 600 books between the ages of 5 and 15. This is a small total. So many quality books already exist - why add to them?

Advocates of children's literature propose many advantages or benefits for children when they read widely and wisely. They contend that some very good children's books, ancient and modern, are available and that these deserve notice from children and adults. If potentially bookish children do not see such works and if adults around them persist in out-of-date, patronising attitudes towards children's literature, this may result in a lost opportunity. One cannot measure what it is that the right book can give to the reader at the right time, but there is usually agreement that something good can happen. For one thing, a child who misses children's literature is missing a certain type of privacy and fun. For another, children's literature may give young readers a deeper understanding of the world, their fellow human beings, and of their own feelings and destiny. Wallace Hildick wrote:

> "One good story is worth hundreds of non-fiction type books because for every Spanish galleon or Chippendale commode or lapwing's egg, a child will be required to recognise in life there will be hundreds of Uriah Heeps or Huck Finns he will need to understand." (1974).

It is also argued by advocates of children's literature that appropriate literature can help children to become quicker-minded, and clearer minded adults, who are confident in making judgements for themselves. They support these arguments by pointing to the many autobiographies of well-known scholars and public figures who have described the delights and excitement of reading when young.

Children's literature can help children handle stress in their personal lives, for example, learning to cope with a new baby, sibling rivalry, or loneliness. Booklists, sometimes called bibliotherapy, exist for such specific problems. Some children seem to find these books for themselves: a girl with little self-respect found consolation in *Tales of a Fourth Grade Nothing* by Judy Blume: a ward of the state re-read *Grimble and Grimble at Christmas* by Clement Freud, the story of a boy left largely on his own.

The reality of a child's story is, in the end, reality about himself or herself. Oscar Wilde illustrated this in his folk tale *The Devoted Friend:*

> "Let me tell you a story on the subject", said Linnet. "Is the story about me?" asked the Water Rat. "If so, I will listen to it, for I am extremely fond of fiction." (196).

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Books have several advantages over television, not the least being that books have a head-start of over 2,000 years on television! Books have an infinite variety of possible scenarios for life, possible solutions, and possible ways of looking at things. Everyone who has written a story in the last 2,000 years has had a slightly different perception of life. Because of this infinite variety, books encompass minorities and majorities whereas most television shows, with an eye to sponsors and ratings, are directed almost exclusively to majorities.

However imaginative television is, on the whole, we tend to submit to someone else's images due to the immediacy of the visual image. When we read a good novel or adventure story, we are freer to create our own images - and this greater freedom is more involving and keeps us glued to the book.

2. *PICTURE BOOKS*

The first books children know are picture books, so called because the writer and illustrator are of equal importance. Picture books are read to children when they are most impressionable, and before other socialisation influences (school, teachers, peers) become more important.

Picture books present societal values to the young child. Through books, children learn about the world outside their immediate environment; they learn about what other boys and girls do, say and feel; they learn what is right and wrong; they learn what is expected of children of their age. In addition, books provide role models - images of what children can and could be like when they grow up.

Picture books are often read over and over again at a time when children are in the process of developing their sexual identities. Sex-role socialisation constitutes one of the most important learning experiences for the young child. By the time the child enters kindergarten, he or she is able to make sex-role distinctions and express sex-role preferences. The indications are that by the age of four, children have been socialised into believing that the primary feminine role is housekeeping, while the primary masculine role is wage earning. In addition to learning sex-role identification and sex-role expectations, boys and girls are socialised to accept society's definition of the relative worth of the sexes. Children learn that boys are more highly valued than girls. With regard to personality differences, they learn that boys are active and achieving while girls are passive and emotional. Eight year old boys describe girls as clean, neat, quiet, gentle and fearful, while they label adult women as unintelligent, ineffective, unadventurous, nasty and exploitive.

Weitzman et al (1972) examined the treatment of sex roles in certain children's books which are described as the "very best" - namely Caldecott Medal winners (most coveted USA prize for preschool books). Analysis concentrated on the winners and runners-up from 1967-1971. This covered eighteen books. He found that women are simply invisible in children's books. Females were under-represented in the titles, central roles, pictures and stories of every sample of book examined. Most children's books are about boys, men and male animals, and most deal exclusively with male adventures. When women can be found in the books, they often play insignificant roles, remaining both inconspicuous and nameless.

In the Caldecott sample, Weitzman found 261 pictures of males compared with 23 pictures of females, i.e. eleven point one percent. The ratio of male to female animals was ninety-five to one. The ratio of titles featuring males to females was eight point three percent. In approximately one-third of the recent Caldecott books, there are no women at all.

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It is easy to imagine that little girls reading these books might be deprived of their ego and sense of self. They may be made to feel that girls are vacuous creatures who are less worthy and do less exciting things than men. Child psychologists report that girls of every age are less likely to identify with the feminine role, while boys of every age are more likely to identify with the masculine role.

In the Caldecott sample, only 2 of the 18 books were stories about girls. In one of these stories, *Sam, Bangs and Moonshine,* the girl has a boy's name. In the second, *The Emperor and the Kite,* the heroine is a foreign princess. Sam's adventures, however, take place in her daydreams, while Princess Djeow Dee manages to save her father only be being so tiny and inconspicuous that the evil men do not notice her.

Rescues feature in many children's stories. These require independence and self-confidence. Rescues are almost exclusively a male activity and the ratio of males to females - five to one - figure in this way in the Caldecott sample. These rigid presentations of sex-role stereotypes are harmful not only to little girls. Little boys may feel equally constrained by the necessity to be fearless, brave and clever at all times. Girls are allowed a great deal of emotional expression, but it is unacceptable for boys to cry or show fear.

Adult role models provide another crucial component of sex-role socialisation. Role models not only present children with future images of themselves, but they also influence a child's aspirations. Among the Caldecott sample, women were engaged in a much narrower range of activities than men. The ratio of male/female adults engaged in service activities was one to seven, while the ratio of male to female adults in leadership activities was five to nil. The ratio of male/female adults in rescue activities was four to one.

A significant finding from the Caldecott sample was that not one woman had a job or profession, yet in the United States of America, upon which the sample is based, forty percent of women are in the workforce, i.e. 30 million women work. Motherhood was presented in the picture books as a full-time, lifetime job.

Furthermore, the motherhood role that is presented in children's books is unrealistic. Real mothers drive cars, read books, vote, take children on trips, balance budgets, engage in volunteer activities, raise money for charity, work in the garden, fix things in the house, etc. The picture books also fail to provide a realistic image of fathers and husbands. Typically, fathers are not depicted as helping with child care or home duties.

At least one publishing company, McGraw-Hill, has now devised guidelines to ensure equal treatment of the sexes. Some of these guidelines include: women to be shown in a wide variety of professions or trades, and sex-typing in job portrayals to be removed. Women within a profession are to be shown at all professional levels, including the top levels, and in positions of authority over men and over other women. Characteristics traditionally praised in males - e.g. boldness, initiative, assertiveness, are also to be praised in females - gentleness, compassion, sensitivity, are to be praised in males. Sometimes men are to be shown as quiet and passive, or fearful and indecisive, or illogical and immature. Women are sometimes to be shown as tough, aggressive and insensitive. The smarter, braver or more successful person should be depicted as a woman or a girl as often as a man or boy. In illustrations, the taller, heavier, stronger or more active person should not always be a male, especially when children are portrayed.

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> "For a story truly to hold the child's attention, it must entertain him and arouse his curiosity. To enrich his life, it must stimulate his imagination, help him to develop his intellect and to clarify his emotions, be attuned to his anxieties and aspirations, give full recognition to his difficulties, while at the same time suggesting solutions to the problems which perturb him. It must promote confidence in himself and in his future - fairy stories do this."
>
> (Bettelheim, 1976)

Fairy stories have great psychological meaning for children of all ages.

The following three responses in Bettelheim's book (1976) illustrate this.

> "In early adolescence a girl had been fascinated by *Hansel and Gretel*, and had derived great comfort from reading and rereading it, fantasising about it. As a child she had been dominated by a slightly older brother. He had, in a way, shown her the path, as Hansel did when he put down the pebbles which guided his sister and himself back home. As an adolescent, this girl continued to rely on her brother and this feature of the story felt reassuring. At the same time she also resented the brother's dominance. Without her being conscious of it at the time, her struggle for independence rotated around the figure of Hansel. The story told her unconscious that to follow Hansel's lead led her back, not forward, and it was also meaningful that although Hansel was the leader at the story's beginning, it was Gretel who in the end achieved freedom and independence for both because it was she who defeated the witch.
>
> As an adult, this woman came to understand that the fairy tale had helped her greatly in throwing off her dependence on her brother as it had convinced her that an early dependence on him need not interfere with her late ascendancy. Thus, a story which for one reason had been meaningful to her as a young child provided guidance for her at adolescence for a quite different meaning."
>
> "The central motif of *Snow White* is the pubertal girls' surpassing in every way the evil stepmother who, out of jealousy, denies her an independent existence - symbolically represented by the stepmother's trying to see Snow White destroyed. The story's deepest meaning for one particular five year old, however, was far removed from these pubertal problems. Her mother was cold and distant, so much so that she felt lost. The story assured her that she need not despair: Snow White, betrayed by her step-mother, was saved by males - first the dwarfs and later the prince. This child too did not despair because of the mother's desertion but trusted that rescue would come from males. Confident that Snow White showed her the way, she turned to her father who responded favourably; the fairy tale's happy ending made it possible for this girl to find a happy solution to the impasse in living into which her mother's lack of interest had projected her. Thus, a fairy tale can have as important a meaning to a five-year-old as to a thirteen-year-old, although the personal meanings they derive from it may be quite different."
>
> "In *Rapunzel* we learn that the enchantress locked Rapunzel into the tower when she reached the age of 12. Thus, hers is likewise the story of a pubertal girl, and of a jealous mother who tries to prevent her from gaining independence - a typical adolescent problem which finds a happy

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solution when Rapunzel becomes united with her prince. But one five-year-old boy gained quite a different reassurance from this story. When he learned that his grandmother, who took care of him most of the day, would have to go to hospital because of serious illness - he asked to read the story of Rapunzel. At this critical time in his life, two elements of the tale were important to him. Firstly, there was the security from all dangers in which the substitute mother kept the child, an idea which greatly appealed to him at the moment. So what normally could be viewed as a representation of negative, selfish behaviour was capable of having a most reassuring meaning under specific circumstances. Even more important to the boy was another central motif of the story: that Rapunzel found the means of escaping her predicament in her own body - the hair on which the prince climbed up to her room in the tower. That one's body can provide a lifeline reassured him that, if necessary, he would similarly find in his own body the source of his security.

This shows that a fairy tale - because it addressed itself in the most imaginative form to essential human problems and does so in an indirect way - can have much to offer a little boy even if the story's heroine is an adolescent girl." (Bettelheim, 1976).

Adults must not make conscious what the child wishes to keep pre-conscious by interpreting the child's feelings to the child. A child must feel that his/her inner thoughts are not known to the parent until he/she decides to reveal them. Otherwise, the parent's domination may seem limitless and hence, destructively overwhelming. Explaining to a child why a fairy tale is captivating, destroys its enchantment and leads to a loss of the story's potential for helping the child to struggle on his/her own. Fairy tales may support a child yet he/she does not quite know how the stories have assisted him/her. The fairy story is therapeutic because the reader finds his/her own solutions, through contemplating what the story seems to imply about his/her inner conflicts at this moment in life.

The significance of fairy stories can be seen in the following quotes from Bettelheim (1976).

"My first and last philosophy, that which I believe in with unbroken certainty, I learnt in the nursery ... The things I believed most in then, the things I believe most now, are the things called fairy tales." (G.K. Chesterton)

"Beneath the surface shimmer of places and princes, fairies and witches, they deal in the profoundest way with the emotional turmoils of childhood: the feelings of smallness and helplessness, the terrifying perceptions of outward dangers and even more terrifying anxieties the child feels possessed by, the mysteries of the outside world, strangers, and the child's deepest question about self and the future."

"Deeper meaning resides in the fairy tales told to me in my chilhood than in all the truth that is taught by life." (Schiller)

"Little Red Riding Hood was my first love. I felt that if I could have married Little Red Riding Hood, I should have known perfect bliss." (C. Dickens)

"Jack the Giant Killer demonstrates manly maturity against pride as such. The lesson of "Cinderella" is the same as the Magnificat (he lifted up the humble). The great lesson of "Beauty and the Beast" is that a thing must be loved before it is lovable ... I am concerned with a certain way of Looking at life, which was created in me by fairy tales." (G.K. Chesteron)

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> "Forbearance, courtesy, consideration for the poor and aged, kind treatment of animals, the love of nature - abhorrence of tyranny and brute force - many such good things have been first nourished in the child's heart by fairy stories." (C Dickens)

When Einstein was asked what children aught to read, he replied, "fairy stories". "And then?" "More fairy stories." "And then?" "Still more fairy stories." (Bettelheim, 1976)

Fairy stories can help children understand that ultimately experience can be manageable and amount to something, that there are few loose ends in life and in its many aspects there are lessons, if only they care to look. Many adults may find this trite, but when fairy stories present the theme well they have all the force of a moral vision: the world as it could be. For example, the child is able to identify with the characters in fairy stories in many different situations. In Snow White, they can participate in the triumph over evil or in outwitting something larger and stronger than themselves in the Gingerbread Man and the Gallant Little Tailor; there is the satisfaction of attaining deserved recognition in the Ugly Duckling or Cinderella; there is the possibility of identifying with heroes in such as Jack and the Beanstalk.

While the child's conscious mind is employed in following the story, the unconscious is also being nourished. This identification process is explained in Bettelheim (1976):

> "The reader does not think in psychoanalytical terms. He does not say to himself "The story of the prince who has to kill a dragon and conquer the spell of the witch before he can win the princess and the kingdom is the story of a young man who is initiated into manhood. He has to prove himself as strong as his father, the dragon, and as cunning as his mother, the witch, before he attains his identity as an adult; hence this story is important to me.' He doesn't say it in these words but he feels the import of the story nevertheless. He recognises it as something to do with his own experience."

Fairy stories are usually set in palaces and with exalted people, and this conveys the impression that the events recounted are important. Further, a king or a prince is representative of his people and, to some extent, all mankind, and, therefore, the reader. Fairy stories usually present single aspects of the character's personality so that, for example, the predominantly greedy personality personifies greed itself or the reasonably honest character personifies pure honesty, and this simplification aids identification for the child in the early stages of self-concept development.

Many fairy stories available in Australia are not the original versions. For example, Charles Perrault (1628-1703), a French writer of fairy tales, wanted to teach a moral lesson with each of his versions of the original tales. By changing them, he robbed them of much of their meaning. In his Little Red Riding Hood, for example, unlike the original version, the wolf is victorious. This reduces the story to no more than a cautionary tale. It also worries children's sense of justice - why should grandma be destroyed? She did no wrong. What wrong did Red Riding Hodd commit? In the original version, Red Riding Hood and Grandma are cut out of the wolf's stomach by a hunter. Heavy stones are sewn into the wolf's stomach who runs, falls, and kills himself.

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Other writers have also tampered considerably with the original versions of fairy stories. In George Cruikshank's *Jack and the Beanstalk*, the Victorian ideal of useful toil is put forward: to the Victorian mind it was much more sensible and economical to make the giant work rather than simply allow him to crash to his death at the foot of the beanstalk. The message is that all working class drunkards should be firmly but kindly redirected. In his *Cinderella*, Cruikshank pauses before the wedding scene to devote pages to the evil of alcoholism and he depicts Cinderella's godmother as persuading the king to allow none at the wedding banquet (Tucker, 1976).

The original versions of fairy stories have also received much criticism. Many adults worry that children will be frightened by the wolves and witches. Chesterton replied:

> "Fairy tales do not give a child his first idea of a bogy. What fairy tales give the child is his first clear idea of the possible defeat of the bogy. The baby has known the dragon intimately ever since he had an imagination. What the fairy tale provides for him is a St George to kill the dragon." (Robinson, 1983).

Such advocates of fairy tales remind that although there are witches, one should not forget that there are also good fairies who are much more powerful.

Specific fairy stories have also suffered criticism. *Goldilocks* deals symbolically with some of the most important growing-up problems of children, such as struggle with oedipal predicaments, search for identity, and sibling rivalry. The story illustrates the meaning of the difficult choice the child must make - to be like father or mother or child? The story teaches that regression to infantile behaviour offers no escape from the difficulties of growing up. However, *Goldilocks* does not help children gain emotional maturity. They may identify with Goldilocks as she runs away for children like to believe that running away makes it possible to evade the struggle of growing up, but there is no happy ending in this story: the conflict is not resolved.

The beginning of *Hansel and Gretel* is often criticised. Parents, one a stepmother, decide to let their children starve in the woods because there is no more food in the house. The young children's belief in their parents as the most certain support of their young lives is suddenly destroyed. Defenders of this fairy tale assert that one of the functions of fairy stories is to inform young people about the totality of human beings, including the capacity for good and evil in all of us.

The ending of *Cinderella* is often condemned. The stepsisters are punished severely (their eyes are picked out by doves in most versions) when their crimes are not very great, while the evil stepmother is not punished at all - this must affect a child's sense of justice.

BEGINNING READERS

In addition to being read, picture books and fairy stories at home and at school, the child is introduced to beginning readers at school. Fortunately, the content of these readers is becoming more interesting and the method of teaching the first stages of reading is changing. However, many of the earlier readers still exist in some schools. Here is an extract from one:

> See the little kitty
> It is up in the tree
> It rand and ran
> It ran up the tree
> Can you catch it?

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It may fall.
O Sam, you are good
You have the little kitty. (Beacon Readers, Book 1, Ginn Pub.)

Be tolerant of these readers. These words must be strictly controlled. The consonants, vowels, diphthongs are the true character of these stories. The true tension that grips the young reader is will I be able to read this next word or page, rather than will the prince kill the dragon? One girl in an infants' class, after getting her first reader, threw it across the room exclaiming, "That's not a story, that's just words!" Every child presently struggling with such passages needs constant refreshment in his/her reading diet with more interesting material. For many children, there is not much enjoyment in decoding these readers. They must have the chance to relax and enjoy listening to stories, which will also convince them that the struggle to learn to read is worthwhile.

COMICS

A young reader soon meets comics and, in Britain, it is believed that children spend three times as much money on comics as on books. Two justifications are usually proposed for the popularity of comics: the sense of ownership (they are bought by children while only 2-3% of books are bought by children); the comic figures can be ugly, lazy, badly dressed, greedy, usually living in gritty urban surroundings, and this is a welcome balance to the idealised characters in more conventional children's literature. It is also believed that children in Britain who read most comics are very often those who also read most books.

Parents often become alarmed by children who read nothing but comics. There are three possible major reasons for children doing this: perhaps the child has poor reading skills, perhaps the other books available are not interesting or attractive for the child, or perhaps the comics are fulfilling some emotional need that is not being met elsewhere.

The most repeated criticisms of comics is that they make reading seem unnecessary. There are words in captions and speech balloons but it is not really necessary to read them: the pictures are self-explanatory. Others argue that the imaginative exercise of working out the connection - any connection - between pictures is good.

These debates aside, what is it that can be objectively described as being wrong with comics as reading material for children? Firstly, too often the foreigners are stereotyped. The multiracial society is ignored, and young coloured readers are asked to identify with popular heroes who are always white. Secondly, most problems are solved by characters endowed with superhuman powers, usually at the pressing of a button or the donning of a special garment, or the utterance of a certain phrase. Thirdly, there is a lack of individual characteristics in the protagonists, especially the heroes, who, when stripped of their gimmicky trappings and crude distinguishing marks, are interchangeable from story to story. Finally, one might also mention the problems inherent in comics that vulgarise great literature, for example, Shakespeare's plays. It is argued that these may possibly encourage some children to try the real thing later. In my experience, most of these versions are found so dull, they turn children off trying the real thing.

To turn children's attention to something more meaty than common commercial comics, it is suggested parents look for a comic strip version of a familiar prose work and encourage them to compare the two treatments, e.g. Treasure Island - most children will agree that good prose fiction can do far more than

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even the best comic-strip fiction.

Similarly, parents can help children contrast condensed versions with the unabridged prose work. For example, James Barrie's Peter Pan abridged by May Byron compared to Barrie's original. Also, Walt Disney versions can be compared to the original. Most critics agree that Walt Disney has destroyed the integrity of many original books such as The Wind in the Willows, Winnie the Pooh, and Pinocchio.

SELECTING CHILDREN'S BOOKS

The child, having graduated from picture books, fairy stories, and beginning readers, is now ready for the joys of children's books. It is a sad fact that 80% of children's books are bought by schools and libraries and only 2-3% by the children themselves. Parents' purchases should not be drawn exclusively from their own past childhood reading experiences because recollection can be confused, and many new and good writers have appeared in the last two decades. Some children's literature is a field that adults naturally grow away from and in this section criteria to consider when selecting children's books will be looked at.

One should be aware that very few books are free from any criticism. Recently, statements by the following groups have appeared in the papers condeming certain children's books: dentists against the depiction of sweet-eating in books, feminists against sexism in books, sociologists against the prevalent middle-class backgrounds found in most stories, and stepmothers complaining against their treatment in fairty stories. Billy Bunter was criticised for making fun of obesity, and Biggles and Dr Doolittle for being racist. Enid Blyton has been critisised for a wide range of sins including encouraging children to be impertinent to adults and inculcating social snobbishness at every possible level. Robinson Crusoe has been criticised for giving an early taste for a rambling life. Some criticisms are justifiable, some are not. *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* was criticised because Dahl's treatment of the Oompa-Loompas and because all five winners of the golden tickets were white. Dahl labelled his critics as "cranks" (and pointed out that he received 500 letters a week from uncomplaining children crying out for another Dahl book!). From the above lists, I agree that sexism, middle-class bias, and the snobbishness and racism of Blyton and Doolittle are most undesirable, but parents must make their own decisions to sort out the "crank" criticisms from the more valid complaints.

Probably the biggest worry parents have about certain children's books is the element of fear they contain, yet psychoanalysts are sure that a child's fantasy life can create demons equal to any picture or prose description. Nevertheless, most believe there may be a limit to what any child can cope with at any one time. They argue that more important than the degree of violence, cruelty or horror shown in some children's stories, the setting is defined right at the beginning as belonging to the distance past such as "once upon a time", "a thousand years ago", "at a time when animals still talked". The fairy story is not set in the here and now, and the child knows that. Similarly, the very general names used to denote the characters help dispel fear, names such as father, poor woodcutter, or ugly duckling. Where names are given they are very common names such as Jack or Hansel.

One cannot always predict what may make an individual child feel fear or depression - a child can read the bloodthirsty stories of the Brothers Grimm without flinching, and sob at *Black Beauty*. A good example of this unpredictability regarding children's fear are their responses to pictures in *Where the Wild Things Are*. Adults expected children to be terrified by these pictures. They were not. Sendak, the author, is still receiving many letters twenty years later asking, "Where are the wild things? I'd like to go there."

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An attractive story for young children usually portrays some conflict of good and evil. Good presents no difficulties - it can be as simplistic as one elf. How to feature evil within copeable dimensions for the child is much more difficult and parents need to observe the responses of their individual children and make their own decisions.

It is also hard to stipulate which particular books are enjoyed by particular age groups. Richard Adams, author of *Watership Down*, when asked at what age group it was aimed, variously replied: "I don't aim it, madam, it just goes off by itself", "The Ice Age group, sir", "Eight to eighty". In this context, I suggest that when reading *Puffins for Parents*, one should not take the age recommendations too exactly - I recently heard of a group of seven year olds who read, understood, and enjoyed *The Hobbit!*

Some desirable features of a children's book include the following: the child is able to read it; the book captures or feeds the child's interests; it meets the child's needs at various points in his/her life; the book has intrinsic value. Regarding the last point, some stories take only the prettiness of life, are coy and moralistic about behaviour, or are not confronting experience with the degree of honesty of which children are themselves capable. Some stories have neither the illumination and mystery of the best fantasy, nor the directness that show us life as it is.

I feel errors in book selection by parents are generally caused by either under-rating the child's emotional capacity and range of interests, or by over-rating the child's capacity for grasping complexity of situation and his/her verbal sophistication.

We should ourselves enjoy and respect any story that we provide for children. We should say, "I like this book. I wonder what the children will make of it", not "This will do for the children and I shall have to bear with it". Wallace Hildick (1974) warns against "the horde - the hideous, cute, pert, plastic, clockwork horde - of child characters that are just as flat and lifeless as Biggles and comic-book night nurses and pulp Federal officers."

What elements do children seem to look for in their fiction? (Apart from the major necessity of a ready means of identification.) Hildick nominates the following:

Firstly, children enjoy a wealth of concrete accurate detail, e.g.

> "Once upon a time, in a gloomy castle on a lonely hill, where there were thirteen clocks that wouldn't go, there lived a cold, aggressive Duke, and his niece, the Princess Saralinda. She was warm in every wind and weather, but he was always cold. His hands were as cold as his smile and almost as cold as his heart. He wore gloves when he was awake, which made it difficult for him to pick up pins or coins or the kernesl of nuts, or to tear the wings from nightingales. He was six feet four, and forty-six, and even colder than he thought he was. One eye wore a velvet patch; the other glittered through a monocle, which made half his body seem closer to you than the other half. He had lost one eye when he was twelve for he was fond of peering into nests and lairs in search of birds and animals to maul. One afternoon, a mother shrike had mauled him first. His nights were spent in evil dreams and his days were given to wicked schemes." (Hildick, 1974, p 72)

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Wallace Hildick comments that to an adult, this might seem like exuberance carried to a fault. However, children are likely to be dazzled and enthralled by such detail. For them, the effect could well be extremely boring without such close particularisation and if, for instance, the passage contained nothing but vague and general descriptions such as "wicked" and "evil" and "gloomy" and "lonely" and was deprived of its thirteen clocks, pins, coins, kernels or nuts. How dull if they were merely described as "many" and "things". The result is similarly dreary if "birds" are substituted for nightingales and "tall" or "very tall" for 6'4", or "middle-aged" for 45, or "a boy" for 12, or "bird" for shrike. The chosen details rather than prosaic generalities help to peg down the fantasy and give credibility to the incredible.

> "There is a kind of double standard where fantasy in concerned in children's literature. The larger details of context in time and space can be most outrageously distorted (with the reader's agreement) but the internal details, the functional ones, those that have any relation to universal reality - such as types of trees or animals or people or cars or processes or forms of behaviour or institutions - must be accurate." (W. Hildick, 1974, p 73)

Secondly, children enjoy an element of anticipation and a hopeful or fearful atmosphere is often more attractive to them than surprise, e.g. will Pinocchio go to Playland, or Tom Sawyer find his insect in the church?

Children appreciate plausible but detectable chicanery on the part of certain characters - and therein lies the appeal of the Gordon Korman books.

Children enjoy a constant appeal to their curiosity in little matters as well as in large ones - what's in Jan's wooden box in *The Silver Sword*? (Seraillier, 1956)

Children enjoy great gifts of improvisation in work or adventure or play on the part of characters, e.g. Pippi Longstocking (Lindgren, 1954)

Children welcome various threats and promises in the plots, corresponding to the child's own basic fears and hopes.

They like the opportunity to experience known and recognised great dangers vicariously and, therefore, safely - and similarly the perpetration of known and recognised mischief.

Children enjoy an uncluttered, preferably humorous attituded towards adults, especially where this tends to cut them down nearer to child-size, e.g. *Jacob Two-Two Meets the Hooded Fang* (Richler, 1975).

Children like things carried to their logical conclusion. (Dr Seuss: "I always make sure if I give a character two heads I provide him with two toothbrushes.") (Stewart-Gordon, 1972).

Bettelheim (1976) contrasts the psychological value of different stories dealing with the same theme, e.g. *Tootle the Steam Train* (a Little Golden Book that sold in the millions thirty years ago) with *Little Red Riding Hood*. He contrasts the *Three Little Pigs* with the fable of the *Ant and the Grasshopper* (both deal with the pleasure or reality principle). These analyses by Bettelheim make interesting reading - the emotional support provided by a story should be an important criterion of selection.

To further guide parents in the selection of books, criticism levelled at three books, still near the top of the popularity polls, will be discussed: *Toad of Toad Hall*, *The Famous Five* series, and *Alice in Wonderland*.

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Toad (based on Shakespeare's Falstaff?) is the personification of the spoilt infant and is generally shown to glory in this despite naggings from Badger and others. With his abundant flow of cash, Toad revels in his own omnipotence, buying house-boats, caravans and motor cars at will, just as in any child's fantasy, and he steals on impulse as well.

Jean Piaget, the renowned child developmentalist, would place Toad in the classical egocentric stage: self-willed, boastful, unable to share the limelight, but basically insecure in strange situations. He is a skilful liar too, but again, like so many infants, Toad almost seems to believe in his own fantasies. When corrected, Toad can be quite genuinely sorry but his sobs never last for long. Toad has the most infantile temper tantrums.

Finally, Toad renounces his old self just as his young reading audience will one day have to turn away from childhood, but Toad shows he has no intention at all of learning any lessons from his previous bad behaviour. Young readers wonder how long this change of personality will last.

This book was written not at children, but for them. With any amount of opportunity for moralising, Grahame allows only a few, largely unsuccessful attempts by the other riverbank animals to get Toad to mend his ways. In Wales, the book was banned, for Toad's irresponsible road behaviour seemed to be approved by the author: "Toad, the terror, the traffic-queller, the Lord of the lone trail, before whom all must give way or be smitten into nothingness and everlasting night." Toad had seven smashes and three bouts in hospital.

Enid Blyton writes dramatic material with many bugle notes of alarm. Her characterisation is excellent. She portrays fully the nasty, snobby, cruel selfishness of which most children are capable when in gangs - a dark side to children that very few children's authors ever touch upon and, if they do, then only in the hero's adversary. However, Blyton seems to give approval to thoroughly bad instincts. The persecutions of people and animals are done so gleefully that readers are encouraged not only to approve of this but to participate in it through the author. Enid Blyton appears to condone anti-social behaviour in her books.

Gerald Mulderig's *Alice in Wonderland* raised doubts about the moral system of Wonderland in which Alice functions. As he points out, heroines and heroes in nineteenth century children's fiction were thoughtful, prudent, and self-sacrificing. However, Alice's whole adventure is precipitated and sustained by impetuous decisions, prompted, largely, by self-indulgence. "Burning with curiosity", she follows the talking White Rabbit down his hole. Alice's attitude towards the changes in her size that occur throughout the stories reflect the alarming extent to which she is dominated by an insatiable wilfulness. When she is small, she wishes she were large, and when she is large again, she wants to be small. Alice remains perpetually dissatisfied. When she leaves the Caterpillar's mushroom, Alice takes with her pieces broken from both sides, so that she will be able to continue changing her size at will.

Her dealings with virtually all the creatures she encounters reflect her self-centred independence and aggressiveness. Bursting at will into private groups as she makes her way through Wonderland, Alice seems to be "an invader disrupting a warm and happy world". At the home of the Duchess, Alice assumes that because she wants to be admitted, she will be admitted. When the Footman questions this assumption, she concludes that he is quarrelsome. Later, she bursts into the Mad Hatter's tea party, despite the unanimous protests of the group that there is no room for her. Alice's lack of concern for those around her make her at times a truly threatening figure in Wonderland. She is vicious

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towards Bill the Lizard.

Alice is not the only wilful, self-indulgent, aggressive child in children's literature, but along with the Famous Five (Blyton) and Toad (Grahame), her conduct is never explicity condemned. The theory of natural reward and punishment so central to the moral system in children's books of the period completely breaks down in "Alice". Though Alice's wrongdoings range from thoughtless impetuousity to premeditated malice, Wonderland never inflicts on her the psychological or physical punishment she seems to have earned.

The most curious fact of the life in Wonderland, as Alice appears to realise gradually, is that one is never held responsible for one's actions. Alice makes fun of the most serious punishment in the moral system, namely death. Death played a major role in the didactic juvenile literature of the Victorian age. Jokes about death and dying pervade "Alice". "They're dreadfully fond of beheading people here, the great wonder is that there's any one left alive."

Alice aggressively makes her way through a world that subverts accepted norms of Victorian behaviour while it ridicules and denies the tradition of inescapable punishment for wrong doing. Wonderland, by consistently gratifying Alice's self-indulgence, suggests that the above-ground code of behaviour that she knew is, like the verses she tries to recite, "wrong from beginning to end".

CONCLUSION

Some final recommendations:

In addition to the Puffin guide, the following are recommended:

Dr Seuss - whimsical stories that carry gentle moral messages to do with the art of living, the dangers of greed and prejudice, the virtues of striving and compassion.

Children also enjoy the Oz series (the well-known *Wizard of Oz* is only the start of a series of fourteen attractive books), and books by Gordon Korman such as *I Want to Go Home; Our Man Weston, ; War With Mr. Wizzle.*

Natalie Babbitt's books *The Eyes of Amaryllis* and *Tuck Everlasting* are also popular, as are John Christopher's book *Tripods Trilogy.*

Paper based on seminar presented at the Unit for Child Studies, May 1984.

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RECOMMENDED GUIDE FOR SELECTING CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

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